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ABSTRACT

Communiversity, a four-year institution of higher learning on the model of the community college, is proposed as a possible modification of the comprehensive two-year community college. Justification for conversion lies in the separate missions of the community college and the four-year college and in the strengths of both types of institutions which allow them to be of benefit to a particular clientele. Articulation of transfer students from community college to the four-year school is also cited as a major problem which could be resolved through the formation of the communiversity. Basic ingredients for the communiversity would include: (1) Being within commuting distance of the people it means to serve; (2) Running a full program from early morning to late evening; (3) Charging low tuition; and (4) Giving equal standing to both "academic" and "non-academic" credit. Three problems the communiversity might solve are overstaffing, overproduction of graduate degrees, and lowering freshman enrollments. For community college faculty, the communiversity is seen as an opportunity for job improvement and expansion of course offerings. Administrators are seen as welcoming the challenge of new problems presented by communiversity. (AH)

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COMMUNIVERSITY....A NEW APPROACH

A cluster of academic innovations in the last quarter century has concerned itself with bringing new groups of students into higher education. Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Special Services - the trio programs - concentrated on poor blacks. The open university and TV College have focused on the adult population, presumably a less mobile group than the traditional college student.

Extension centers have been expanded; more and more courses are being given right in the workplace. Yet an innovation older and more successful than any of these - the comprehensive two-year community college - has not itself been seriously modified throughout its history, perhaps because its great success precluded much serious reflection on fundamental change. One possible modification which has never had serious consideration is the four-year community college.[1]

No stronger prejudice exists in higher education than that against transforming a public community college into a four-year institution. In Michigan, for instance, the State Plan for Higher Education specifically singles out such a transformation as an objective to be avoided, and, in fact, community colleges and universities are two institutions so different in purpose and emphasis that most marriages between them would probably be ill-advised.

The motto of community colleges is training and service. They provide local adults with practical education at convenient hours and low cost. There is a large admixture of academic courses in most programs to give

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students some exposure to the world of learning, academic respectability and a launching platform to existing four-year programs. But in no sense is academic work the raison d'etre of the community college.

For the four-year institution or university, academic work is absolutely central; there the motto is learning and research. Of course, these latter institutions sometimes fall short of excellence in conveying current learning or in creating new knowledge; naturally, they are not immune from the practical; nevertheless their standing depends on the academic quality of their staff, not on its willingness to be of service to the community.

Most students who prefer the community college will go there: most of those who prefer the university will find their way to it. However, students in the latter group have a much longer track and are entitled to more rarefied rewards. The community college student can at any time move over into the university track to try his luck; but in most cases he will sacrifice geographical proximity and low tuition.

He will probably lose all of his credits amassed outside of the academic areas. Finally, he will be restricted to academic areas in amassing any further credit toward a degree. The communiversity - a four-year institution of higher education on the model of the community college - would resolve his dilemma. The community college student could continue his education beyond two years in a familiar atmosphere.

The communiversity would give an obviously viable idea a chance to grow to its full potential. A community college would achieve four-year capacity in a manner compatible with its present, two-year mission. A communiversity would:

1. Be within commuting distance of the people it means to serve:
2. Run a full program from early morning to late evening:
3. Charge low tuition:
4. Give equal standing to both "academic" and "non-academic" credit.

The equation of academic and non-academic credit requires some elaboration. The separation of these two areas is based on historical distinctions of long standing. Certainly, however, in these egalitarian times it would be precipitant to separate learning from the mechanical arts, relegate the latter to a lower standing and then defend the separation and relegation on moral and intellectual grounds.

Refrigeration and French, Mechanics of Real Estate Law and American History - all should be entitled to equal status in obtaining a degree in further education. In addition, traditional degree titles - Certificate Holder, Associate of Arts, Bachelor of Arts, Master of Arts - ought to be transformed into the more meaningful titles such as Associate of Further Education, (first degree), (second degree), (third degree).

The absence of traditional degree titles and requirements does not indicate a comtemptuous rejection of all academic distinctions. In fact, concentrations of courses in specific areas ought to be encouraged: majors, minors, area studies distribution requirements and prerequisites are all means of giving a pattern to postsecondary education programming.

However, it may be possible to broaden the concept of major to include occupational and avocational specialties which are usually excluded, to make distribution requirements a more flexible instrument of the individual

student's interests, and to limit the prerequisite system to a way of providing a reasonable guarantee of academic success.

Finally, we might consider awarding a college degree to legitimate the efforts of those students who use the communiversity, not as a vehicle toward professional competence, but mainly as an avocational pursuit over a period of years.

It will be easier to define communiversities in the abstract than to set them up, for there is little doubt that the communiversity would face difficulties unquestionably more severe than those faced by the comprehensive community college at its inception. The community college movement acquired its momentum at a time when the potential student body for institutions of higher education was expanding faster than traditional colleges and universities could accommodate them.

It seemed reasonable at the time to channel less academically qualified students into community colleges and reserve the limited openings in universities to those with the best chance of success. However, in recent years, the situation has markedly altered.

In many cases the number of freshmen openings at universities exceeds the supply of students and community colleges with their attractions of geographical proximity and low tuition have come to be regarded as sturdy competitors in a stuggle for survival.

It is fair to say that universities with enrollment problems would not look with dispassion on the expansion of the community college to the communiversity. Undoubtedly they would point out that the last two years at a proposed communiversity would duplicate services already rendered by universities, especially in their wide network of extension services.

One can only point out that the extension services of most universities offer only geographical proximity, not low tuition, nor a wide range of services and of general and technical courses. Moreover, all extension centers of universities carry with them, directly and indirectly, the burden of research expenses which are no part of the delivery of local educational services at whatever level.

Finally, extension services are not generally central to a university's mission; thus their status is almost certain to be inferior to that of the parent institution. None of these objections can be made agairst the proposed communiversity.

Moreover, the communiversity may help solve three very real problems many universities currently face: Overstaffing, overproduction of graduate degrees, and lowering freshman enrollments. There is little question that there is a continuing oversupply of college instructors. At present they form a resource of learn ng and skill which cannot be used and constitute an embarrassment to the universities that train them.

Only a new market for their talents would resolve the moral ambiguities inherent in the process of training people for jobs that probably won't exist. The communiversity would provide such a market. Undoubtedly, in the short run, its inception would shrink the size of upper division classes at the university. However, many additional upper-division students attracted to the communiversity would be working people for whom the university would not be a realistic alternative. In the long run, there may even be a chance that the communiversity will increase the size of upper-division courses, and graduate enrollments, at the university because of an increased interest in formal higher education by a new group of Americans.

Thus, graduate programs for college teachers, appropriately modified, might be given a new lease on life and shrinking freshman enrollments might be compensated for in two ways: A new market for graduate degrees and an expansion at both upper-division and graduate levels.

Another possibility would open up, especially for those schools which have become universities only recently. These schools - many of them former teachers' colleges - altered their original mission in the expectation that the need for centers of learning and research would expand unabated to the very edge of the present century. The expectation of such expansion proved illusory, but some new universities thrived none the less.

Others, less fortunate, have been subject to declining enrollments which have seriously undermined faculty and administrative morale. These schools might consider transforming themselves into communiversities. In that way a faltering institution might be able to recover its balance and provide training and service on a new, more competitive footing.

The formation of communiversities would be a problem and an opportunity for the comprehensive community colleges. At first there would be an uneasy adjustment to a new status. Administrators and, especially, faculty members would have much to learn and would be facing genuinely new situations. However, over the last ten years, community colleges have generally increased in status relative to the universities which at first barely acknowledged their existence, but now consider them a serious partner and, at times, a serious rival.

Moreover, faculties and administrators in many community colleges have increased their academic standing significantly and would compare for percentage of earned doctorates with some of the smaller senior institutions.

Finally, community college administrators, especially at the larger institutions, have held positions whose complexity has been an excellent training-ground for new responsibilities.

Thus the communiversity can be seen as an opportunity for community college faculty and administrators. For the former, there would be the possibilities of meaningful job upgrading and widening course offerings; for the latter, there would be the challenge of new problems in an atmosphere of positive change.

The difficulties concerning the communiversity can be mitigated only up to a point. Beyond that point it remains an open question whether the disruptiveness of the idea or its rejuvenative qualities will eventually come to the fore. There may be an allowable risk, however, if the alternative to action is a continued sense of stagnation accompanied by depressed morale.

The received knowledge in the sixties was the higher education and its accompanying enterprises led the forces of the Great Society as by natural right. In the seventies the received knowledge is that this same institution must fight for scraps like a beggar in a starving province. Institutions do not generally rise to eminence and descend to defeat and humility within the space of a few years, but the people who serve these institutions are sometimes subject to startling, downward shifts in mood. The communiversity stands a fair chance of lifting the spirits of such people the moderate degree necessary to rise from panic to the useful work of extending mass education to its limits in a responsible manner.

FOOTNOTES

[1]This extension of purpose is more radical than, but parallel to that purposed by Murray P. Leavitt in "The Baccalaureate Degree in Engineering Technology in the Community College: A Model of Vertical Extension," Technical Education News, Vol. 33, No. 2 (May-June, 1974), pp. 2-4. It differs radically from the vertical extension described by Raymond Schultz and Hugh Stickler in "Vertical Extension of Academic Programs in Institutions of Higher Learning," The Educational Record, (Summer, 1965), pp.231-41, which delineates the transformation of two-year colleges - mostly small, mostly private - to four-year institutions on a standard baccalaureate model.

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